

## Press

## Zigging and Zagging at Harper's

*Under Editor Lapham, consistency is a hobgoblin banished*

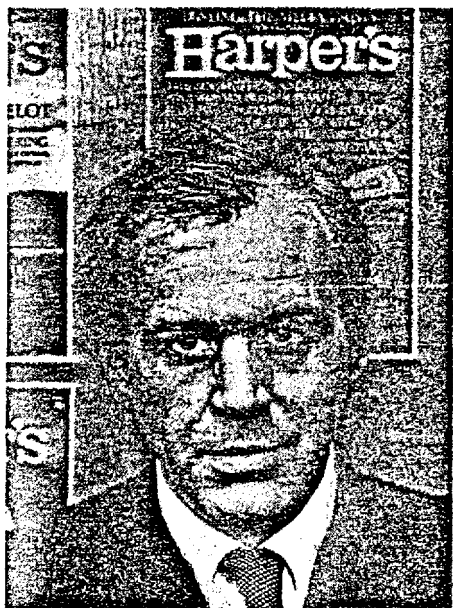
In the small world of opinion magazines, creed is usually constant. Rarely are readers surprised by where the *New Republic*, for instance, *National Review*, *Commentary* or *Atlantic* comes down on a given issue. *Harper's* is something else. The 128-year-old monthly has changed editors three times since 1967, creating a slight zigzag effect. Now the magazine once known for its cheerful progressivism appears to have taken a tendentious turn to the right.

Consider, as evidence, the January issue. The cover piece, by California Republican Senator S.I. Hayakawa, attacks Congress's free-spending ways and describes the benefits Hayakawa believes make voluntary unemployment increasingly attractive. Another article argues for a pure merit system and against the affirmative-action position in the Allan Bakke case before the U.S. Supreme Court. December's lead piece attacked the environmentalists in their long-running dispute with Consolidated Edison over location of a power plant in the Hudson River Valley. The November cover featured *National Review* Editor and Yaleman William F. Buckley Jr.'s latest quarrel with his alma mater, over its insistence on presenting "all sides" of "any issue."

In his monthly "Easy Chair" columns and longer articles, *Harper's* Editor Lewis H. Lapham also frequently takes a conservative tilt. Lapham bristles, for example, at the all-out conservationist position in the energy debate. "People want what they want," he maintains, "and they will pay whatever prices they must, and so it is no use [for the Government] to tell them what's good for them." Lapham inveighs bitterly against a variety of adversaries and attitudes, including the empire building of major cultural institutions. He has no quarrel with readers who complain that his magazine often dwells, in classic conservative fashion, on "the imperfectibility of man and the failure of his grand designs."

While the change in tone was not made for box-office reasons, it does serve to distinguish *Harper's* from its chief and more liberal rival, the *Atlantic*. Nonetheless, *Harper's* continues to print liberal and even left-wing authors. One of Lapham's convictions is that the U.S. system requires not only debate but also intellectual confrontation: "Democracy means that you and I must fight. Democracy means a kind of Darwinism for ideas." Though he wants to preserve "what is best in our traditions," he insists that he is not at all conservative "in the Republican board-room sense."

In fact he has no firm ideology, shows little respect for authorities secular or spiritual, and regularly knocks the rich. He is a cantankerous example of that feisty species, the "aginner," a challenger of whatever is fashionable at the moment, particularly in the Boston-New York-Washington communications axis. Says he: "If I come into a room and find everyone in agreement on something, I'll try to think of an opposite view." He de-



Lapham in his New York headquarters  
*Dwelling on the imperfectibility of man.*

lights in the constant rediscovery that the emperor, just about any emperor of any realm, has no clothes. Lapham feels no obligation to suggest a new outfit; to proclaim nakedness is enough. One former *Harper's* senior editor admires the lively controversies Lapham stirs up, but questions his constant use of what he calls "scorn and nihilistic raillery."

Naturally Lapham sees no virtue in constancy of content. Between 1972 and early 1974, before it became modish to dump on the CIA, Lapham promoted several articles critical of it. In 1976 he ordered a positive piece on the CIA's record, and has now commissioned Pro-Communist Journalist Wilfred Burchett to review *Decent Interval*, the new book attacking the agency by former CIA Analyst Frank Snepp. During Spiro Agnew's final months in office, when the Vice President was under attack from all sides, *Harper's* sought (but could not find) a cogent article defending him. Before and after the election, Lapham raked Carter repeated-

issue titled "Deadly Virtue," the editor takes the stance that since Carter was elected "to redeem the country," it is unreasonable to expect him merely to govern it. Now Lapham is shopping for an author who wants to stick up for the President.

At 43, Lapham could pass for a university don. His suit and tie somewhat out of sync, he has the somber look of a man who reads too many problematic manuscripts. Born to affluence (his grandfather ran a shipping line and served as mayor of San Francisco; his father left shipping for banking), he went to Hotchkiss, Yale and then Cambridge with the ambition of becoming a historian.

But instead of taking a Ph.D., Lapham opted for daily newspaper work (at the San Francisco *Examiner* and then at the late New York *Herald Tribune*). Finding conventional reporting too confining, he quit in 1962 and worked as a staffer and a freelance for a number of magazines, including *Harper's*. When Editor Willie Morris quit in 1971 because of a dispute with the publisher, and most of the *Harper's* staff resigned in sympathy, Lapham came on full time—"I became an editor by default and mistake"—and served in the second slot under the new boss, Robert Shnayerson. Lapham gradually assumed more power as Shnayerson became increasingly involved in spin-off ventures. In June 1975 Lapham got the title of editor, and the following January, when Shnayerson resigned, took full control.

As it had under Morris and Shnayerson, *Harper's* under Lapham is losing money. Circulation is now 304,000, down 25,000 since 1975, but increases in subscription rates and in advertising volume during the second half of 1977 have reduced the magazine's deficit. "We're getting there," says Publisher James Alcott. "We're almost in the black."

John Cowles Jr., chairman of the Minneapolis *Star and Tribune*, *Harper's* parent company, takes no part in editorial decisions and says that he is happy with Lapham's stewardship. Cowles believes that Lapham has restored the style and tone the magazine had under John Fischer, who ran it for 14 years before Morris took over. It is again a journal of strong essays, with one person making most of the selections, rather than the more collegial operation that existed under Morris and Shnayerson.

Semiretired and living in Connecticut, Fischer, 67, is a Lapham fan. "Lewis' political views are more conservative than mine, and he has a more pessimistic view of the world," says Fischer, "but on editorial matters we think alike. He has made the magazine more controversial and more cohesive. I do wish that he could get a little more humor in." Small chance; to Lapham, naked emperors are no laugh-